From Transaction to Transformation: Embedding Learning and Unlearning in Philanthropy

A Case Study of the Northern Manitoba Food, Culture, and Community Collaborative

MakeWay

2025

Acknowledgements

MakeWay would like to recognize the dedicated staff of the Northern Manitoba Food, Culture, and Community Collaborative (NMFCCC) for their guidance and support of this research. Their commitment to ensuring the work remains grounded, relevant, and responsive to partners has been invaluable. In particular, we thank Kristy Anderson, Cheryl Antonio, Tasha Monkman, Julie Price, and Amanda Froese for their meaningful contributions to this research.

We also extend our appreciation to the NMFCCC team for facilitating interviews and providing relevant photographs and media for this project. In addition, we warmly thank the research participants for sharing their insights and experiences.

We would also like to acknowledge Omar Elsharkawy for his leadership on this project and Todd Jaques for his thoughtful supervision throughout. We thank Monica Allaby for supporting project communications, Joanna Bakyaita and Sade Petlele for their design work, and Alison Henning for her feedback on many parts of the project.

NMFCCC gratefully acknowledges the many individuals whose support and vision helped bring the collaborative to life, beginning with its origins as a pilot project. Staff honour the late Miriam Okemow of Manto Sipi Cree Nation, whose guidance and commitment were instrumental in the formation of NMFCCC. The team also extends deep gratitude to Elder Joe Monroe and Elder Paul Smith, whose wisdom and support helped shape the foundation of the collaborative as it exists today.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, many funders have made a greater effort to support Indigenous communities and organizations. This shift is part of a broader conversation about making the philanthropic sector more equitable, transparent, and aligned with community needs. Yet even with good intentions, funders can cause harm when they act on assumptions, rely on processes rooted in colonial ways of working (such as top-down decision-making or one-size-fits-all reporting), or fail to truly listen to the communities they aim to support.

What matters most is not that funders fully understand the lived experiences of Indigenous partners, but that they recognize communities as the experts in their own lives, trust them to lead, and approach the work with humility and an openness to change.

Doing this well requires learning–not with the aim of becoming experts on Indigenous issues, but to meaningfully shift philanthropic systems and practices. Many have started this work through training, strategic planning, and conversations with Indigenous partners. These steps can help make funding more relevant and accessible; however, they can also delay support or place the burden of education on the communities themselves.

The challenge is finding ways to support meaningful learning and organizational change without slowing the flow of resources or being extractive. Is there a better way to support learning while ensuring communities receive funding?

The Northern Manitoba Food, Culture, and Community Collaborative (NMFCCC) shows that it is possible. In NMFCCC, funder learning and unlearning are not just byproducts of the work—they are woven into the Collaborative's values, relationships, and granting practices. Here, learning happens alongside granting.

While communities in Northern Manitoba have already highlighted what NMFCCC has enabled on the ground, this case study looks at another part of the story: how NMFCCC also impacts funders, supporting their learning and contributing to positive changes in their organizations and beyond.

Interviews with NMFCCC funders (referred to as "collaborators") revealed that their involvement has had a profound personal impact. Collaborators also described how being part of NMFCCC has influenced their organizations' approaches to granting, ways of working, decision-making, and commitments to reconciliation.

These findings show that funders do not need to have all the answers before engaging with Indigenous communities; the learning process can occur concurrently with funding.

With humility and a willingness to learn from communities, funders can grow their understanding through the work itself. This study demonstrates that, by combining learning with action, NMFCCC is helping to create real, lasting change in communities, organizations, and the philanthropic sector as a whole.

NMFCCC staff, collaborators, Northern Advisors, and community members during a learning trip in Kinosao Sipi, Norway House Cree Nation in 2024.

Introduction

Northern Manitoba is rich in history, culture, and community. It is the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Anisininew, Ininiwak, Nehethowuk, Denésuliné, and the Red River Métis. These lands and waterways are sacred and deeply connected to the identity, traditions, and way of life of the people who live here. Across the region, communities are doing powerful work growing and harvesting food, supporting youth, and building health and strength.

It is also here in this region that the Northern Manitoba Food, Culture, and Community Collaborative (NMFCCC) is demonstrating a transformative approach to philanthropy–one that is reshaping how funders engage with Indigenous communities, not only locally but across the country.

Funding collaboratives (also known as donor collaboratives, philanthropic collaboratives, funder groups, or funder networks) bring together funders to work toward shared goals. Sometimes, the purpose is to simplify the funding process and get better results: by combining money, knowledge, and relationships, collaboratives can streamline giving and make it easier to address big challenges. However, some collaboratives integrate community guidance and leadership. This rebalances traditional power dynamics by ensuring that those closest to the issues have a say in how resources are distributed. NMFCCC adopts this community grounded approach. What makes NMFCCC even more unique is its focus on positive change in community and in philanthropy. The Collaborative nurtures reciprocity and relationality among all participants, fostering relationships that extend beyond grantmaking and financial support. NMFCCC also creates spaces for mutual learning, shared decision-making, and long-term connection. Funder learning is built into the Collaborative.

As both a collaborator and the administrative host of NMFCCC, MakeWay has a close-up view of how the model works and what it makes possible. While NMCCC's role as a community helper is well documented, its influence on collaborators is less understood.

MakeWay and NMFCCC were curious: how does being part of NMFCCC change how collaborators think and act within NMFCCC and across their work? Does participation shift how collaborators build relationships, make decisions, or support Indigenous-led work more broadly? We set out to explore these questions.

Why Philanthropy Must Look Inward

> **"This type of relationship is born out of an inherent recognition of power dynamics, and the nature of extraction in philanthropy. Despite its benefits, philanthropic activity is a part of the structure of state-making that Indigenous peoples experience as part of colonization." (Lee, 2023, p. 5)**

To understand why initiatives like NMFCCC matter, it is important to examine how philanthropy typically operates and how it can inadvertently harm or exclude certain communities.

Philanthropy today is shaped by colonial and capitalist systems and practices. Much of its wealth has been built by extracting resources, land, and labour at the expense of Indigenous and other marginalized communities. Philanthropy rarely acknowledges the harmful origins of its wealth or its ongoing connection to systems of oppression. Instead of challenging these systems, it often reinforces them by allowing wealthy individuals and institutions to decide which issues matter and how they should be addressed. In doing so, philanthropy can perpetuate the very inequalities and challenges it seeks to solve.

Members of Meechim Project harvesting corn. Meechim Project is a social enterprise and food security project based in Garden Hill First Nation and a partner of NMFCCC.

Philanthropy is not neutral; it operates within systems of power and inequality. To support real change, the sector must acknowledge its limitations and commit to transforming its practices. This means developing and embracing funding models that are inclusive, accountable, and respectful of community leadership and priorities.

Many funders have not stopped to ask hard questions about their role in these systems: Where does our money come from? Who decides where it goes? Who is excluded from access? What assumptions guide our giving? As researchers and community voices have pointed out (Kohl-Arenas, 2015; Gilmore, 2016; Trimble, 2023), philanthropy often avoids deep self-reflection about its power and resources.

Philanthropy and Indigenous Communities

Traditional grantmaking reflects paternalistic power dynamics that do not facilitate true reciprocal relationships between equal partners. Indigenous organizations must ask for money and foundations hold the power to grant it—or not."

(Scott-Enns, 2017, p.2)

These broader issues in philanthropy manifest in specific and often harmful ways for Indigenous communities and organizations. Standard philanthropic practices–such as how funding is distributed, who is deemed eligible, and how success is defined–frequently clash with Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and governing.

In addition to being misaligned, these funding processes can also be inaccessible. Grant applications are often long, bureaucratic, and available only in English on online portals that require reliable internet access. Funding is typically tied to narrow, siloed focus areas that do not reflect the interconnected nature of community priorities. Short-term timelines and rigid reporting requirements further ignore the holistic and relationship-based nature of Indigenous-led work, making it harder to offer support that is respectful and responsive to community-defined goals.

These practices can have deep emotional impacts on Indigenous peoples. Trisha Moquino, from the Pueblo villages of Cochiti, Ohkay Owhingeh, and Kewa, in New Mexico, describes how grantmaking can leave Indigenous leaders feeling alienated:

"We often feel ashamed and traumatized for thinking that our community goals to heal and thrive on our own terms do not match nicely with the broader goals of philanthropy (or people in philanthropy)" (Moquino, 2019).

Moquino's words point to a painful contradiction: philanthropy can make Indigenous people feel like they are the ones falling short, when in fact, it is philanthropy that has not reflected on its history and problems. She reminds us that philanthropic wealth was often built through the dispossession of Indigenous land and resources and it is philanthropy that needs to be scrutinized:

"[This history] ought to be acknowledged in order for philanthropy to move from a position of harming Indigenous peoples to one that will lead to the creation of philanthropic coalitions that seek to learn from and visit with Indigenous nonprofit leaders and communities."

Awareness of these issues is growing. Initiatives like the Philanthropic Community's Declaration of Action, which coincided with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report, show more recognition of the need to support Indigenous-led work. But awareness has not yet translated into widespread or equitable funding.

Indigenous charities continue to receive significantly less than non-Indigenous ones. In Canada, they receive an average of $132,000 less per year in private donations than non-Indigenous charities (Planatscher, 2022). Globally, the share of funding going to Indigenous organizations is extremely low: from 2016 to 2020, only 0.3% of global charitable giving went to Indigenous Governments and Autonomous Regions and Indigenous Peoples Organizations (Archipel Research and Consulting, 2024).

Looking at proportional funding within Canada shows a similar pattern. In 2019, Indigenous people made up 4.9% of the population, but Indigenous groups received just over 0.7% of total donated funds (Redsky et al., 2022). That is only $1 for every $138 given to non-Indigenous groups (Redsky et al., 2022). Based on population alone, Indigenous organizations receive just one-seventh of the funding they would get if money was distributed proportionally.

In Northern Manitoba, there are few registered Indigenous charities compared to southern Manitoba, and the rest of southern Canada, which highlights the uneven geography of charity across Canada. While settler governments, like municipalities, are considered qualified donees by the Canada Revenue Agency (which allows them to issue tax receipts and receive grants), many Indigenous governing bodies are not. This is a structural barrier that further limits access to philanthropic resources. Blacksmith, Thapa, and Stormhunter (2022) argue that, in Manitoba, these exclusions are not accidental but rooted in the Indian Act and the colonial philanthropic infrastructure that continues to overlook or bypass Indigenous communities.

Maryann Simpson, Land Based Coordinator for Pine Creek First Nation's Jordan's Principle, softening an elk hide.

Tension Between Learning and Action

"No one is going to understand deeply the Secwepemc connection to salmon. I don't need you to understand it. I need you to know that I understand it and you can trust me to do good work because I have the lived experience, the world views, and the knowledge to act in accordance to these teachings."

(Archie, 2022, 34:02)

Calls for change in philanthropy often emphasize the need for deeper reflection and education among funders. Shifting mindsets and practices is essential, but when learning becomes a substitute for action, it can slow down progress and unintentionally recentre settler institutions.

On an episode of "Reimagining Philanthropy" (The Philanthropist, 2022), Kris Archie, CEO of The Circle on Philanthropy, described something she commonly sees in the sector: settler philanthropic institutions believe that they need to understand Indigenous communities before they can start funding them.

To build understanding, they often invest in consultants (who are usually well paid), research, conferences, webinars, and other professional development. They spend time and money on their own institutional readiness before providing resources to Indigenous communities (Archie, 2022).

Archie (2022) calls for a different approach rooted in trust. She urges funders to respect the lived experiences and expertise of Indigenous communities without requiring them to fit into external definitions of success. Learning and unlearning are important, but they should happen alongside action.

Funders must trust that Indigenous communities know what they need and be willing to show up with humility, curiosity, and an openness to listen, act, and learn through relationship.

Funders do not have to navigate this work alone. They can respectfully engage with organizations that are trusted within the communities they aim to support, prioritizing community involvement throughout the process. These partners can help guide funders in their learning and foster meaningful relationships.

A community member from St. Theresa Point First Nation harvests weekenz, a traditional medicine, as part of a project supported by NMFCCC.

Background

NMFCCC offers valuable lessons and an example for philanthropy. It was created in direct response to the fact that existing philanthropic systems and practices excluded many Indigenous communities in Northern Manitoba. At the time, there were no Indigenous "qualified donees" in the region and very little charitable support was reaching communities. Other barriers–such as requiring internet access, matching funds, or forcing Indigenous applicants to compete against larger, southern-based organizations with professional grant writers and fluency in the funding landscape–made it nearly impossible for northern communities to access funding, even when funders were eager to contribute.

NMFCCC began as a pilot with four funder collaborators in 2013 and became a fully realized collaborative the following year. Today, it is a partnership between 12 collaborators, a group of Northern Advisors, staff, and communities (the Collaborative has partnered with more than 75 since 2013), who all work together to support strong local food systems and uplift culture.

NMCCCC creates space for funders to learn alongside one another, taking some of the burden off of communities to educate individual funders.

Learning through NMFCCC happens through reciprocal, respectful exchange: story sharing, listening, and walking alongside each other in partnership. The Collaborative's pooled funding approach also simplifies the grant process, making it more accessible and culturally aligned for community partners.

Together, the Collaborative:

- **Enables like-minded organizations to pool and provide money and resources to communities**
- **Supports community-led solutions for strengthening food systems, culture, wellness, education opportunities and local economies**
- **Centres community voices, leadership, and knowledges**
- **Fosters and supports a learning and unlearning environment for collaborators, staff, communities and Northern Advisors**
- **Contributes to systems change through practice and evidence**

Structure

NMFCCC's organizational structure is intentionally designed to mimic a web: relationships, the sharing of information and ideas, and benefits are all interconnected (Figure 1). This web-like structure provides strength and is intended to support individuals, organizations, and communities to contribute their experience and learn in beneficial ways.

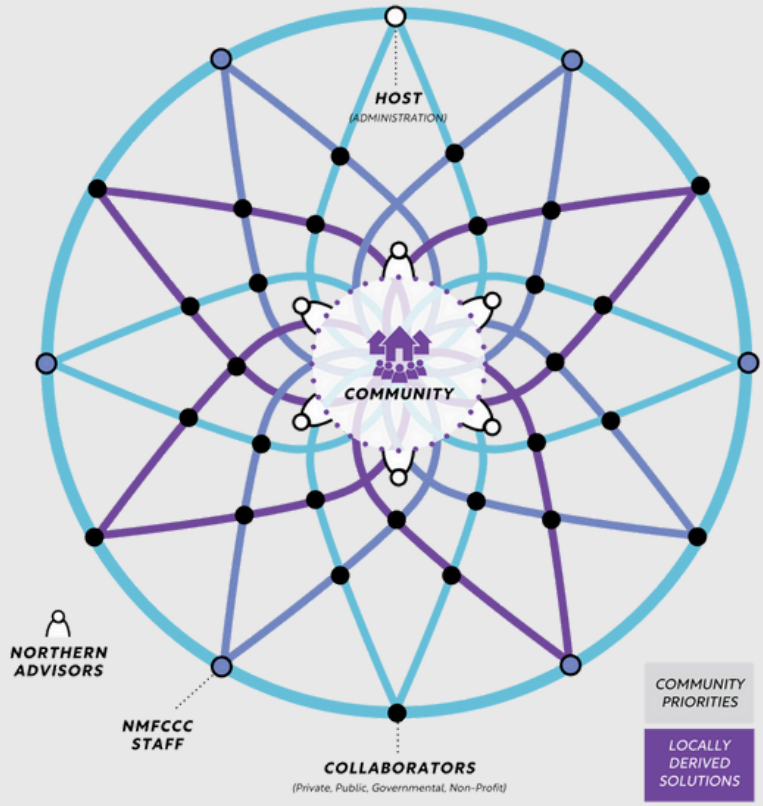

Figure 1. NMFCCC structure

Collaborative Roles

Community Partners

Community partners lead a wide range of funded initiatives and also receive in-kind support from the Collaborative. NMFCCC encourages and helps them share insights and lessons learned with staff, collaborators, and other community partners.

Community partners also sometimes host learning trips to deepen understanding and connection.

Northern Advisors

Northern Advisors are a group of northern people, mainly Elders, who guide staff in their work. They play a critical role in shaping the strategic direction of the Collaborative and act as a sounding board. Northern Advisors ensure that the initiatives and work of the Collaborative are culturally appropriate and aligned with community needs.

Collaborators

Collaborators are the funders who provide resources and believe in the model and mission of the NMFCC. Typically, one or two staff members from each organization take part in the Collaborative's work.

Collaborators play a key role in the granting review process and act as the bridge between their organizations and the NMFCCC. They are expected to show up as learners, helpers, and supporters, actively contributing to the Collaborative's overall work and functioning.

The process by which collaborators join NMFCCC reflects the Collaborative's commitment to relationality. NMFCCC staff are typically introduced to potential collaborators through word of mouth. Even then, the NMFCCC does not ask funders to join the Collaborative simply because they have funding to offer. NMFCCC prioritizes collaborators who will engage as learners and active supporters of its mission.

NMFCCC also maintains a firm stance against donor-specific recognition. While collaborators are acknowledged on NMFCCC's website, their logos do not appear on individual project materials and outputs. In keeping with its pooled funding model, NMFCCC does not produce tailored reports for individual collaborators. Instead, it provides publicly accessible reporting intended to serve both collaborators and community members.

Staff

The staff team manages the day-to-day operations of NMFCCC, coordinating between collaborators, advisors, and community partners. They ensure effective implementation of the Collaborative's many initiatives and operations.

Left to right: Cheryl Antonio, Kirsty Anderson, Amanda Froese, Tasha Monkman, Alexandria Moodie (former staff), and Julie Price.

Ways of Working

NMFCCC's ways of working (Figure 2) are illustrated in a circular model rooted in the Collaborative's six core values. The model shows how opportunities and investments in key areas generate positive outcomes that ultimately advance the NMFCCC vision: "Communities in Northern Manitoba are thriving and our partnerships are mutually transformative."

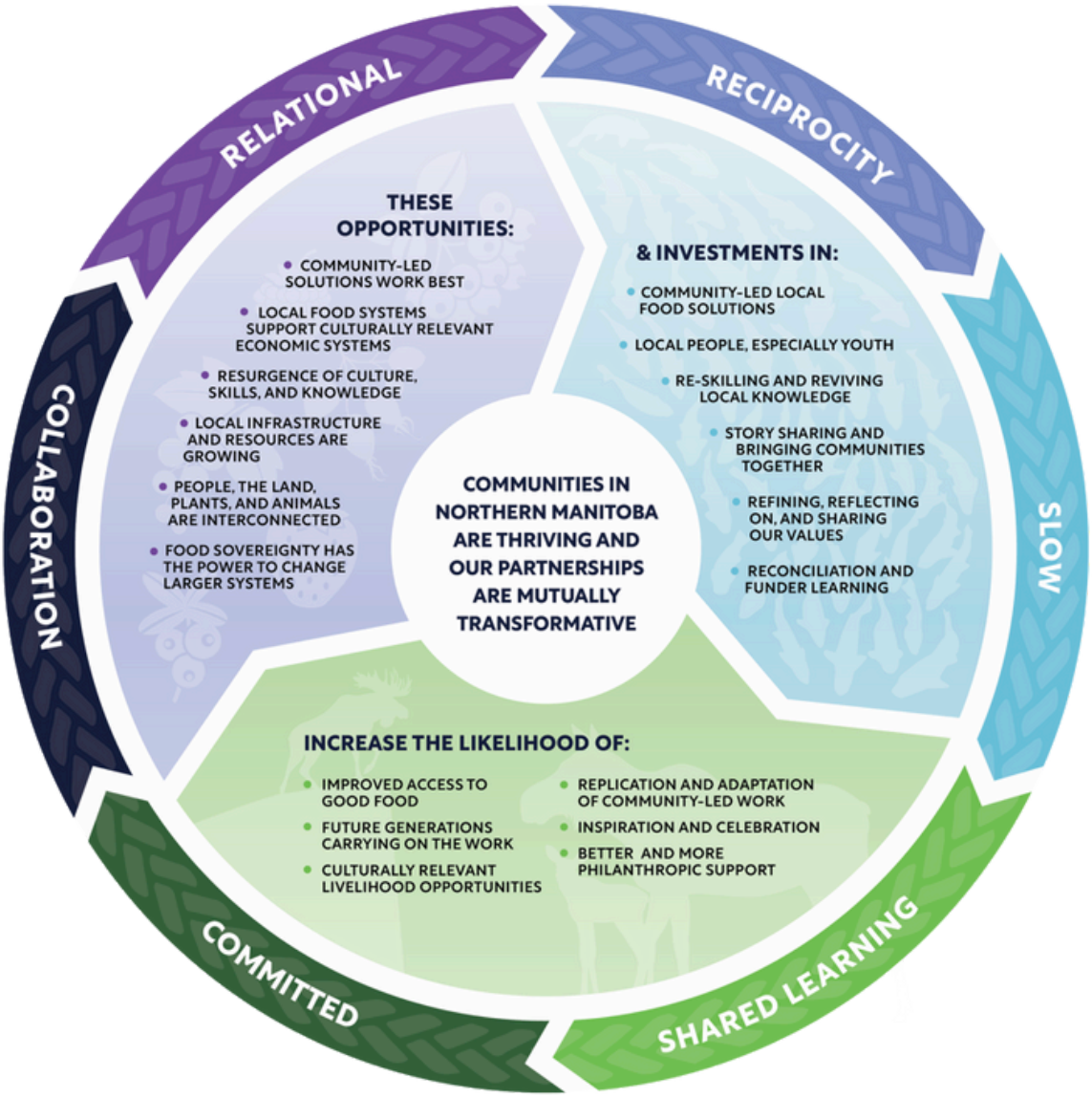

Figure 2. NMFCCC's ways of working

OUR VALUES

RELATIONAL

We focus on building connections with each other through conversations, community visits, and story sharing. Our relationships are not bound by project timelines or granting periods, and we build relationships for the long-term.

RECIPROCITY

We give in return to each other's efforts, driven by mutual respect for each other's contributions.

SLOW

We recognize the impacts of colonization, and that healing and re-skilling will take more time than many governments or funders typically consider. Going too fast might do more harm than good. So, we are taking it slow and steady to help communities and their local infrastructure grow in a sustainable and rooted way.

SHARED LEARNING

We all have wisdom to share, and to work together, we must understand each other. When we listen and learn from one another, we all grow. Together we can pass what we learn to the next generation to continue the cycle of learning and knowledge-sharing.

COMMITTED

We are there for each other as long as a partnership is sought. This can include through granting, making connections, problem solving, being friends, sharing stories and more. We value the commitment people make to each other and their work.

COLLABORATION

We work in partnership by pooling and sharing resources, knowledge, networks, and ideas. Rooted in the belief that we are stronger and have more potential when we work together.

NMFCCC sees its ways of working as a living document that evolves based on ongoing learning and changing community needs. The process of developing this document, which was originally called a theory of change, spanned nearly four years and involved conference calls, emails, in-person meetings, learning trips, and communication with Northern Advisors. Julie Price, an NMFCCC staff member, explained:

Early drafts focused on "problems" that needed to be "solved" by well-meaning funders and were filled with words that community partners did not understand. Over two years, NMFCCC members revised the document to better reflect shared values and use language that was easier for people outside of the philanthropic world to understand, especially community partners.

> **"The Collaborative worked slowly and ensured all voices were heard. We worked relationally and in the spirit of reciprocity, and with the intent of learning from and with each other."**
>
> (Price, 2018)

Creating Better Philanthropic Support

From the beginning, NMFCCC has aimed to influence the philanthropic sector more broadly and support systemic change. It views collaborators as agents of change who can bring new ways of working back to their home organizations. Investing in reconciliation and funder learning is an important part of this approach and help create better and more philanthropic support for communities in Northern Manitoba.

Unlike conventional funding models that are transactional and top-down, NMFCCC centers relationships and community leadership in every aspect of its work. The Collaborative is grounded in principles that northern Indigenous communities identified as essential to good philanthropy helpers: relationality, reciprocity, slowness, shared learning, commitment, and collaboration.

Relationships are at the heart of NMFCCC's approach. They are built over time through conversations, community visits, and story sharing that are not limited to project timelines or grant cycles. This stands in contrast to the more typical grantmaking process, which can feel impersonal: an organization applies for funding, the funder provides money, the organization completes the work and writes a report. NMFCCC replaces that dynamic with one rooted in mutual respect, continuous dialogue and relationship, and long-term commitment.

"The NMFCCC exists because...

- **Communities in Northern Manitoba were receiving very little support from philanthropic sector despite many fundable opportunities and community needs**
- **Communities asked that helper organizations work relationally and collaboratively**
- **To serve Northern Manitoba, primarily Indigenous communities, to receive funding and wrap around supports and support philanthropic organizations to learn, self-reflect, and shift behaviors, and influence systems change**
- **Philanthropic organizations wanted to share the risk and rewards of grant making in this region, extend their reach into the provincial boreal north, and share the benefit of dedicated staff and the power and joy of group (un)learning**
- **Philanthropy needed to center community solutions, needs, voices, and create a tailor made approach for Northern Manitoba"**

NMFCCC (2025)

Findings

To understand how NMFCCC has influenced collaborators and contributed to good philanthropic practices, research staff at MakeWay conducted interviews with ten current and former collaborators. Some interviewees are also involved in other collaboratives hosted by MakeWay, which may shape their perspectives. MakeWay staff manually transcribed and analyzed interview data for common themes using qualitative analysis software.

Interviews with collaborators offered insight into how participating in NMFCCC shapes people personally and professionally and how those shifts influence their organizations and the broader philanthropic sector. This section begins by describing the key practices that support collaborator learning and unlearning, then explores the personal and professional transformations they spark, and finally, the organizational changes that follow.

Practices That Foster Learning and Unlearning

Interviewees highlighted the following four activities and practices as especially impactful on their personal and professional growth, as well as their organizations' practices:

1) Learning Trips

Visits to partner communities foster relationships and provide firsthand insight into local cultural, environmental, and community dynamics. These multi-day trips include NMFCCC staff, Northern Advisors, and collaborators, and they take place at the invitation of a community partner. Communities invest significant time and energy into preparing the itinerary, often with support from experienced collaborators.

Participants spend time together, meet with local leaders and community members, and take part in cultural practices or daily activities, such as gardening, fishing, or traditional competitions. These immersive experiences foster a deeper understanding of northern Indigenous cultures, histories, and governance systems and promote respect for Indigenous knowledge.

During and after the trip, participants reflect and engage in conversations that challenge harmful assumptions and unlearn colonial mindsets. This process helps build more respectful and responsive ways of working with Indigenous communities.

Collaborators, staff, and community members during a 2022 learning trip in Churchill.

2) Granting Process

Collaborators are expected to participate in the NMFCCC granting process, which facilitates funding and their learning. Rather than maintaining a traditional funder-driven model, where the decision-making power lies primarily with funders, Northern Advisors, and community members also play a role in the process.

The process begins with a conversation between community members and NMFCCC staff, by telephone or in-person. If the project is a good fit based on NMFCCC's funding criteria, a staff member will provide them an application. Community members then work with staff to develop the application–support that can make the process more accessible to community partners.

Peer reviewers (other community members from Northern Manitoba) then review the applications.

Peer reviewers do not comment on whether the Collaborative should fund a project; rather, they bring their wisdom and experience to each proposed project in a supportive way.

After the peer review process, NMFCCC staff integrate feedback into the applications. They are then given to decision-making committees for review. Each decision-making committee is made up of one Northern Advisor, one peer reviewer, and three collaborators. Northern Advisors choose whether they want to take part in the decision-making or if they only want to provide context and guidance.

The first meeting in the decision-making process is the "Understanding Call." It is a space for curiosity, understanding, and surfacing questions about proposed projects.

Reviewers do not think about decisions at this point of the process. Questions that arise in this meeting are passed on to community members, who have a chance to update or clarify their application. Final decisions are made in the second meeting, the "Decision Making Call." Even if a community does not receive funding, the Collaborative finds a way to support and encourage their work.

One collaborator described the effect the NMFCCC granting process has on participants as follows: "The Collaborative reinforced that it's not just about providing funds. It's about creating a process where everyone has a voice, and decisions are made equitably" (Participant 10).

3) Consensus-based Decisions

The Collaborative requires consensus to make decisions, including in the granting process. The goal is to reach an outcome that everyone supports, which can require more time and effort. Mutual respect is key, ensuring all participants can share their insights, enthusiasm or concerns about a decision. This approach fosters a shared sense of ownership, commitment to the proposed projects, and strong decisions.

4) Story-Sharing

NMFCCC also uses story-sharing to support funder learning and encourage better practices in the philanthropic sector. The focus on story-sharing emerged at the request of communities when NMFCCC staff asked how else the Collaborative could offer support. Stories are shared by and with communities when they invite the Collaborative to do so and take many forms. They include multimedia projects like videos and podcasts, a traditional annual report, and a learning report–a reflective document the addresses the ways of working and highlights key challenges and adaptations. The Collaborative also encourages collaborators to share these stories within their respective networks and organizations.

These stories support funder learning by offering insight into lived experiences, on-the ground impact, and community solutions. They also help communities support and learn from one another. In its storytelling, NMFCCC intentionally focuses on community strengths, beauty, and power.

Individual Changes

The Collaborative's ways of working and the practices described above have a deep and lastng impact on the people who participate. For many of the interviewees in this study, engaging with the Collaborative became more than a professional responsibility–it evolved into a personal commitment. This shift was closely tied to the Collaborative's relational and human approach, which recognizes participants not just by their job titles or roles, but as whole people with unique gifts and experiences.

This changed how participants saw their roles in the Collaborative and in their organizations, moving them away from a transactional mindset and toward a deeper, more personal sense of responsibility. As one interviewee reflected:

> **"Working with the collaborative has changed the way I advocate. It's no longer just a job—it feels like a calling... It fundamentally shifted my understanding of grantmaking because it was such a relational process. I can't conceive of doing grantmaking any other way now."**
>
> (PARTICIPANT 1)

Several participants attributed shifts in their institutional practices to the meaningful relationships they developed with NMFCCC staff, other collaborators, and community members. Participants spoke about how the personal connections they formed to the people, the work, and the broader mission deepened their dedication to the Collaborative's goals.

This growing sense of commitment to the work and to becoming better philanthropic partners helped catalyze broader changes within their organizations. This is how one participant described the experience:

"I got to know people, and it suddenly became very relational, very personal, very one-on-one. The more I learned, the more I wanted to contribute to the Collaborative, to see if I could, through good partnership, learn how to be a good contributor to truth and reconciliation" (Participant 4).

Participants also described the value of fostering connections and understanding between people from southern and northern regions. For example, one participant said: “The strong emphasis on relationships and the need for time to build relationships really stood out. It’s about building on strengths and knowledge from the north instead of imposing ideas from the south” (Participant 9). Many expressed a desire to continue working in collaborative spaces over the long term.

One participant identified the Collaborative's inclusive, equitable model as key to supporting their learning. They explained:

“With the Collaborative, because it is such an inclusive and equity-based model, it doesn’t matter who you are, how much money you're bringing in, whether you're a funder or a community advisor, or whatever, right —you’re there as part of a very equitable group” (Participant 10).

The model fosters a sense of belonging and shared power, where collaborators, Northern Advisors, and community members participate on equal footing.

For many participants, involvement with the Collaborative led to meaningful shifts in how they understand Indigenous experiences, the realities of Northern Manitoban communities, and the role of philanthropy in these communities. These changes were often described as deeply personal, influencing not only their professional work but also their broader perspective on the communities they support. One participant shared that the Collaborative opened their mind:

> **“Since [joining] the Collaborative, my life has changed. My mind is open... I feel like the Collaborative could change a lot of things and make Canada a better place if people follow the same policies and ways of granting funding and the way we work... It just feels good to know that I’m part of something bigger.”**
>
> (PARTICIPANT 2)

Participants also emphasized the impact of experiences that fostered direct connections with Indigenous communities. One participant highlighted how meaningful engagement with communities changed the way staff within their organization approached the work:

"Managers from all across [our organization] now had a shared experience of camping or [staying] in a cabin on the land. So, then the way that [we make] decisions after having a shared experience like that, you can totally see the difference" (Participant 1).

Similarly, in-person visits and learning trips served as powerful opportunities to challenge assumptions. One participant described the humbling experience of realizing their own biases and how witnessing the Collaborative's work firsthand changed their perspective:

"I'm so glad I went to that [learning trip], because that also gave me a really good sense of sort of what had happened in the past [granting cycle], what was some of the learnings, what needed to shift in the future cycle ... So personally, I would say it was sort of humbling, just confronting the fact that I might have had some stereotypes in my mind about how well this process worked. I was really impressed and humbled by how organized it all was. Everyone knows what they're doing and why, everyone's really passionate about the work, the process itself from the community advisors, leading this work in community, you know, getting the applications, shortlisting them, presenting them, all the back-end administrative stuff... all the way down to the decision-making. It was such a well-oiled machine that I have to say I felt a little bit ashamed that I had even [wondered how well it worked].

(PARTICIPANT 10)

These immersive experiences deepened participants' understanding of local realities and the stories became powerful advocacy tools in shaping organizational policies. One participant highlighted how these experiences fostered both personal and professional growth:

"The learning trips really gave people a good opportunity to really feel the community and understand the issues in that specific community... So I think that that helped me grow as a person going on those learning trips, which in the end helped me as an [organization] employee as well" (Participant 5).

Interviewees noted that historical power imbalances in philanthropy are often rooted in a lack of awareness and in outdated practices that prioritize funders' interests over those of communities. In this context, unlearning harmful or extractive practices becomes just as important as adopting new, community-driven approaches. Rather than focusing on the failures of past models, participants described how meaningful change emerged organically through opportunities to listen, reflect, and embrace new ways of working. As one interviewee shared:

"The collaborative gave me the tools to challenge outdated practices in my organization and push for changes in governance and grantmaking... I've learned a lot of things I didn't know before, and it built a foundation for me to seek my own learning... The collaborative taught me principles of reciprocity, being relational, and moving slowly—those are ideas I now use in all my work."

(PARTICIPANT 4)

Institutional Changes

In addition to having a personal impact on the individuals who participate, NMFCCC also supports change within the organizations they represent. Participants described a range of institutional shifts, including changes in grantmaking practices, relationship-building approaches, and governance structures.

Grantmaking Changes

Most of the changes that collaborators reported related to their grantmaking practices. Because these practices are the primary touchpoints between collaborators and community partners, even small adjustments can have a meaningful impact. Participants identified changes in the following key areas related to grantmaking:

Funding Length

Many collaborators reported a shift toward multi-year funding models after joining NMFCCC. Traditionally, philanthropy operates on short-term, year-to-year funding cycles, which can create instability for community members and limit long-term planning. Through their involvement in the Collaborative, however, collaborators came to recognize the value of providing financial certainty by committing to longer-term support. One participant shared:

"Through the Collaborative, we learned that multi-year funding is critical for making an impact. Before, our funding was always year-to-year, but now we've shifted to offering multi-year commitments because of what we've seen works in this model" (Participant 8).

Another participant, who had previously encountered administrative barriers when trying to introduce multi-year commitments in a program that only allowed annual grants, shared:

> **"So multi-year funding—that was new too. The program was always just year to year. We had to seek authority for every single dollar, for every single partner, even though we'd been working with various partners for maybe 15 years, it was still year to year... so [multi-year funding] was also something new that came about because of [our participation] in the Collaborative."**
>
> (PARTICIPANT 1)

Their involvement in the Collaborative helped them understand the value of and make the case for multi-year funding commitments.

Funding Amounts

When asked about the impact of their participation in the Collaborative on grant amounts, many collaborators found it difficult to say whether funding increases were directly tied to NMFCCC. However, many participants did note an overall increase in disbursements, particularly to Indigenous-led initiatives, and believed that being part of the Collaborative played a role in this shift. The data suggests that participation in the Collaborative contributed to increased funding in several ways:

- **Larger contributions to NMFCCC**
- **Additional financial contributions to organizations with whom collaborators established relationships through NMFCCC**
- **Internal changes that led to more funding for Indigenous-led organizations not part of NMFCCC**

The following is a list of specific, measurable changes that collaborators reported making since joining the Collaborative:

- **One organization has committed a $30 million endowment transfer to Indigenous-led organizations, with $10 million disbursed thus far, influenced by NMFCCC, among other factors.**
- **One collaborator noted that 40% of their grants now go to Indigenous-led organizations—a 100% increase since joining NMFCCC—amounting to an estimated $4 million annually.**
- **One collaborator shared that their organization increased its contributions to NMFCCC over time as the Collaborative demonstrated success, but they were unable to disclose by how much.**
- **One participant said, "I'd say because of what we learned through NMFCCC, we started thinking what could that [collaborative model] look like in other places" (Participant 9).**

- **A participant shared that they joined other collaboratives as a result of their positive experience with NMFCCC.**
- **One collaborator mentioned that the conversations around how power and community self-determination led them to committing to capital transfers over many years.**

Easing Community Burdens

The relationships participants built through the Collaborative changed how they viewed the work they funded, leading their organizations to invest more actively in the success of community partners. Instead of viewing grants as one-time transactions, collaborators became more invested in partners' long-term success, offering additional financial support when needed.

Through their involvement with NMFCCC, collaborators realized that requiring community members to engage with multiple funders, often on tight timelines, can be burdensome and disrupt the work. They witnessed the value of a more coordinated, collaborative funding approach.

Many collaborators also began making changes within their own organizations to streamline grant processes to reduce the demands they place on communities. For one collaborator, this meant moving away from treating funding as a simple approval-or-rejection process. Instead, they began working alongside community members to find pathways to "yes" and provide more meaningful support. They explained:

> **"The grantmaking process with the Collaborative was very genuine... Instead of thinking 'yes or no,' it became more about 'how can we say yes to this?' That approach changed our thinking and pushed us to be more flexible and supportive of community-led work."**
>
> (PARTICIPANT 4)

One collaborator now gives participants the option to share project outcomes verbally instead of only through written reports. When discussing how their organization adjusted its reporting requirements, another participant described changes in how they receive grant applications:

> **"We've experimented with verbal reporting for small grants, like just accepting a phone call rather than a written report. It's a small way of acknowledging that people have different ways of communicating. This practice mirrors what the collaborative is doing with their proposals."**
>
> (PARTICIPANT 6)

Another participant shared: "A project that received funding from the Collaborative ran out of funding. Because of the relationships built, our organization decided to top-up that project's budget with a $25,000 contribution" (Participant 4). These examples demonstrate how collaborators are moving away from traditional philanthropy's rigid, one-time funding cycles toward more adaptive, trust-based funding models.

The emphasis on relationships ensured that community members were not abandoned when initial funding ended but rather supported to meet their ongoing needs.

Overall, through NMFCCC, collaborators were able to see the work that fragmented, duplicative funding processes create for community partners and began adopting collaborative, trust-based approaches to reduce the workload.

Changes in Governance Practices

Participation in the Collaborative prompted some collaborators to rethink and reshape their organization's governance practices to better align with the values of NMFCCC. This includes changes to decision-making, accountability, and the inclusion of community voices in governance. Collaborators shared that their involvement in NMFCCC helped them question outdated practices, adopt more relationship-centered approaches, and challenge power dynamics in governing.

One participant shared how the Collaborative's successful results influenced their organization's funding decision-making process: "The way the program was run changed. [Budget allocation meetings] used to be a fight, but once we became part of the collaborative and they saw the way we were funding differently, [supporting NMFCCC] actually became easier" (Participant 1).

As a second example, a participant shared that their institution embraced the Collaborative's commitment to a theory of change (the previous name for NMFCCC's "Ways of Working"), integrating it into their own approach: "When we looked at the best practices of other organizations we admired, the Collaborative was right up there. The fact that the theory of change wheel was at the centre of what they did–we adopted that as a practice" (Participant 7).

Another governance change collaborators identified was a move toward more inclusive and consensus-based decision-making. Rather than relying on hierarchical structures where funders have the final say about granting decisions, they began implementing processes that gave community members a meaningful role. This shift allowed community voices to actively shape outcomes rather than merely respond to decisions made by others.

"We adopted an agreement scale for consensus-based decision-making," said one participant. They explained that their Board of Directors was always democratic, but "instead of just voting, we work through differences until we reach consensus, referencing the theory of change throughout" (Participant 3).

One collaborator noted that their engagement with NMFCCC led to policy changes that prioritize Indigenous-led decision-making within their funding frameworks:

"We have changed in that basically all of our new grants are to Indigenous-led and serving organizations. We do have a better understanding now of the complexities in Indigenous grantmaking. One main takeaway is ensuring Indigenous people lead and benefit from the initiatives we fund" (Participant 7).

Grant Recipients

Participating in NMCCC also inspired collaborators to increase their support for Indigenous communities and organizations. For example, Participant 6 said, “We shifted a portion of our funding to focus on reconciliation. At first, it was small, but now [over $5 million] a year of our disbursement quota goes to reconciliation-focused initiatives.” Another described, “NMFCCC was the first Indigenous funding collaborative our foundation participated in. The success of that model, our positive experience working within it, and the clear need to support Indigenous-led philanthropy led us to develop a dedicated funding strategy focused on supporting funder collaboratives led by and serving Indigenous communities across Turtle Island” (Participant 7).

Some participants shared that their organizations began directing more funding to communities with whom they had existing relationships. Collaborators also reported that they had provided additional direct funding to projects they had already supported through NMFCCC.

A group of youth stretch a hide at a gathering organized by Food Matters Manitoba, a partner of NMFCCC.

New Programs

For some collaborators, participating in the NMFCCC provided inspiration for new initiatives, particularly for land-based, community-driven programming. For instance, one collaborator shared how their organization developed a pilot program focused on family-based land activities:

"We actually established a pilot program [for communities to participate in land-based activities]. It wasn't just because of the collaborative, but it was inspired by what we had seen and learned from participating in the learning trips" (Participant 8).

Additionally, another collaborator was inspired by the NMFCCC's practice of paying "rent" to a Treaty 1 signatory Nation in recognition of the traditional territory where their office is located and is exploring a similar practice for their own office, as well as making financial contributions to Indigenous communities when hosting events on their territories.

For other collaborators, NMFCCC reinforced the importance of existing commitments, leading them to expand funding streams and commit to supporting Indigenous-led initiatives long term. One collaborator described how being part of the NMFCCC strengthened their organization's determination to maintain and increase their contributions, sharing, "Since joining the collaborative, we've doubled down on our commitment. We've renewed our funding and have no hesitation about continuing to support this work" (Participant 7).

They further explained how their organization adapted its funding approach, shifting from supporting Indigenous programs within larger non-Indigenous institutions to prioritizing Indigenous-led organizations directly, noting:

"It's also influenced how we fund other Indigenous-led initiatives outside the collaborative. We brought in more Indigenous-led funding streams. Before, we might have funded Indigenous programs within larger organizations, but now we prioritize Indigenous-led and serving organizations directly."

Discussion & Conclusion

Across the philanthropic sector, there is a growing recognition of the need to support Indigenous-led initiatives and engage more meaningfully with Indigenous communities. Encouragingly, more philanthropic organizations are working to shift resources toward communities in ways that reflect and respect community needs and priorities. Yet, as this paper has noted, these efforts often begin with internal learning and capacity-building. These are steps that, while valuable, can delay funding and place the burden of educating funders on Indigenous communities.

This research explores an alternative approach that integrates funder learning directly into the grantmaking process. NMFCCC offers a model that not only centers community voices and leadership but is transformative for everyone involved. Funder learning is a core reason why the Collaborative exists, and it is woven into all aspects of its work.

By offering both a collaborative funding model and a supportive learning environment, NMFCCC also reduces the time and effort communities spend engaging with multiple funders, educating them on their experiences, and navigating complex requirements to receive funding.

Through learning trips, the granting process, and consensus-based decisions, NMFCCC encourages collaborators to reflect on how their organizations work, examine power structures, and show up as their full selves, as equal partners. Collaborators are not expected to join NMFCCC with perfect knowledge. As a trusted bridge between collaborators and communities, NMFCCC ensures that funding flows, learning occurs, and the risk of harm to communities is reduced.

A community member processes meat at Minegoziibe Anishinabe School.

Interviews with collaborators affirm the value of this approach.

Participation in NMFCCC leads to meaningful personal shifts: a deeper understanding of Indigenous realities and systemic barriers, stronger relationships with communities, and a more grounded sense of how to show up as funders. These experiences translated into real institutional change, including:

- **Multi-year funding to provide greater stability for community members**
- **Reducing application and reporting burdens to be more responsive to community needs**
- **Increased funding for Indigenous-led initiatives**
- **More inclusive governance models, ensuring community voices shape funding decisions**

While this research highlights the success of NMFCCC's model, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. It reflects the perspectives of collaborators, not community members, and not all collaborators participated. Future research could explore the long-term sustainability of the institutional shifts participants reported, how community partners experience the Collaborative, and how this model might be adapted in other geographies and funding contexts.

Still, the findings underscore the power of relational and community-centered approaches to philanthropy, where funders are deeply immersed in the work and supported to learn, unlearn, and embody new ways of being and working. Through the NMFCCC, philanthropy becomes more than a transaction; it becomes a shared process of transformation.

By embracing this integrated model of learning and action, funders can move beyond traditional structures and cultivate the kinds of partnerships that lead to lasting change within institutions, across the sector, and most importantly, in communities.

References

Archie, K. (2022). What would true, reparative giving in the philanthropy sector look like? (Host: R. Omidvar) [Audio podcast episode]. In Reimagining Philanthropy in Canada. The Philanthropist. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AAj2PP_fIU&t=2s

Archipel Research and Consulting (2024). Global Funding Trend Analysis on Indigenous Philanthropy. International Funders for Indigenous Peoples.

Blacksmith, C., Thapa, K., & Stormhunter, T. (2023). Indian Act Philanthropy: Why are Community Foundations Missing from Native Communities in Manitoba, Canada. Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research, 14(S1), 12-pp.

Lee, D. (2023). Remaining unreconciled: Philanthropy and Indigenous governance in Canada. Aboriginal Policy Studies, 10(2).

Planatscher, M. (2022). The Economics of Charities Serving Indigenous Peoples (Doctoral dissertation, Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa).

Price, J. (2018). Key lessons in developing a Collaborative's theory of change. MakeWay. Retrieved from: https://makeway.org/in-the-news/key-lessons-in-developing-a-collaboratives-theory-of-change/

Gilmore, R. W. (2016). In the shadow of the shadow state. S&F Online, 13(2), 1–7.

Moquino, T. (2019). Let's Talk about Fundraising: A Perspective from Cochiti Pueblo. Nonprofit Quarterly. Retrieved from: https://nonprofitquarterly.org/lets-talk-about-fundraising-a-perspective-from-cochiti-pueblo/

Northern Manitoba Food, Culture, and Community Collaborative (2025). About Us. Retrieved from: https://nmfccc.org/about-us/

Redsky, S., Brascoupe, W., Blumberg, M. & Lang, J. (2022). Canadian charities giving to Indigenous Charities and Qualified Donees – 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.canadiancharitylaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Canadian-charities-giving-to-Indigenous-Charities-and-Qualified-Donees-2019-Final.pdf

Rockefeller Foundation. (2021). Funder Collaboratives: A Topic Brief for Donors. Retrieved from: https://www.rockpa.org/funder-collaboratives-a-topic-brief-for-donors/

References

Rumble, T. & Numata, Y. (2024). Prioritizing restitution, Indigenous leadership, and the future with 'restorative philanthropy'. The Philanthropist. Retrieved from: https://thephilanthropist.ca/2025/03/prioritizing-restitution-indigenous-leadership-and-the-future-with-restorative-philanthropy/

Scott-Enns, I. (2017). Reconciliation in Philanthropy: Learning By Doing. The Philanthropist. Retrieved from: https://thephilanthropist.ca/2017/05/reconciliation-in-philanthropy-learning-by-doing/

Trimble, S. (2023). "Ongoing harm under a prettier, brighter umbrella": A critical analysis of reconciliation talk in Canadian settler philanthropy. Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing, 28(4), e1719.

MakeWay

MakeWay is a national charity and public foundation with a goal to enable nature and communities to thrive together. We do this by building partnerships, providing solutions, grants, and services for the charitable sector across the country.

MakeWay Foundation (BN 868947797) is a national charity and public foundation with a goal to enable nature and communities to thrive together.

MakeWay Charitable Society (BN 130560188 RR0001) is an operating charity that houses social change projects ranging from neighbourhood-scale initiatives to national conservation efforts on a shared administrative and governance platform.

makeway.org